The Ethics of Interpretation in Qualitative Inquiry

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RECLAS, University of Jyväskylä, 29 January 2019

BEYOND RESEARCH ETHICS

THE EVOLUTION OF RESEARCH ETHICS

• There is a long history (70+ years) of the development of research ethics protocols, with particular reference to biomedical and clinical sciences where participants are perceived to be vulnerable and stand to be exploited.

• The Nuremberg Code (1947) is the most recognised document providing guidelines for experiments on human beings, as a direct consequence of the Nazi regime’s excesses and blatant violation of basic human rights and autonomous decision-making.
THE EVOLUTION OF RESEARCH ETHICS

- The Declaration of Helsinki is another seminal frame of reference for the ethical conduct of research and the protection of research participants in the field of medicine, ratified by the World Medical Association (WMA) in 1964 and has been amended on a number of occasions.

THE PRACTICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS

- The regulatory framework of research ethics
  - Preparation of information sheets
  - Recruitment of participants
  - Informed consent procedures
  - Protection of participants’ identities and their right to withdraw
  - General Data Protection Regulation (EU 2018)
  - Security surrounding data storage
  - Provision of dissemination of research findings
  - Seeking approval from ethics committees etc.

BEYOND RESEARCH ETHICS

- Research ethics addresses issues of access, participation, anonymisation, protection of confidentiality and dissemination of findings, but not ethics of interpretation.

- Even recruitment of participants’ consent involves interpretation – what Daniel Dennett (1991: 73-74) refers to as the ethics of science: "people may not be used in experiments without their informed consent, and it is simply not possible to obtain informed consent without verbal interaction".
BEYOND RESEARCH ETHICS

- Ethical dilemmas go beyond data collection and participant recruitment processes to include interpretation of data. (Sarangi 2007, in press)
- This is particularly so in the context of institutional/professional language/communication studies, within the qualitative research paradigm.
- **Qualitative research is interpretive** – and by extension, subjectivity and bias come into play.

DIMENSIONS OF ETHICS IN QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

- **Must interpretation of qualitative data be ethically bound?**
  - "As such, *empirical work is a form of descriptive ethics*, focused on describing a particular state of affairs that has some moral or ethical relevance." (Sugarman 2004: 226)
  - Is it ethical to come to the data with a pre-determined interpretive/analytical apparatus?
  - What are the consequences for the researcher, the field and the researched?

- **The insider (emic)/outsider (etic) positioning in the interpretation of data.**
  - The Occam’s razor (also called the principle of parsimony) – making too many assumptions [in the process of data interpretation] reduces the credibility of explanation – which applies to both insiders and outsiders as interpreters of data.
  - When does our interpretation of data become epistemologically alarming?
  - How do we resolve/minimise variability in interpretive repertoires?
DIMENSIONS OF ETHICS IN QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

- **Reliability and validity issues** apply to both quantitative and qualitative research.
- **What is reliable may not be valid**: interrater-reliability does not guarantee validity of categorisation and claims made on the basis of categorisation.
- Like interrater reliability – which does not address the issue of validity – can we approximate inter-analyst validity?

DIMENSIONS OF ETHICS IN QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

- **Contested interpretation is a likely outcome within a community of interest.** (Sarangi 2015)
- **Triangulation of data and interpretative repertoires** – the mechanism of checks and balances.
- **Ecological validity** (Cicourel 2007) and respondent validity

DIMENSIONS OF ETHICS IN QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

- Striving towards **ecological validity** (Cicourel 2007): how we seek to convince others of the viability and authenticity of our claims and can be understood by our use of primary and secondary data sources. Ecological validity can only be approximated in the social and behavioural sciences.
- **Triangulation** in two senses: accessing and utilising different kinds of primary and secondary data; validating interpretative procedures by seeking respondents’ insights.
### DIMENSIONS OF ETHICS IN QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

- The ethics of access and the observer’s paradox
- The ethics of participation and the participant’s paradox
- **The ethics of interpretation and the analyst’s paradox**
- The ethics of dissemination/intervention and the paradox of rigour or relevance

[Sarangi in press]

### DIMENSIONS OF ETHICS IN QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

- **Two axes of ethics** – good/bad and right/wrong – inevitably giving rise to ethical dilemmas.

- **Science [of interpretation]** is inseparable from ethical conduct.

### THE ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION
• N. R. Hanson (1958), in the tradition of philosophy of science, and in relation to experimental psychology, argues that perception is intertwined with concepts — hence any observation is theory-laden as opposed to ‘phenomenal seeing’.

• He offers a distinction between ‘seeing as’ and ‘seeing that’: ‘it is a matter of logic, not merely a matter of fact, that seeing as and seeing that are indispensable to what is called in science, seeing or observing’ (Hanson 1958: 86)

• “Seeing that threads knowledge into our seeing; it saves us from re-identifying everything that meets our eye; it allows physicists to observe new data as physicists, and not as cameras ... Observation in physics is not an encounter with unfamiliar and unconnected flashes, sounds, bumps, but rather a calculated meeting with these as flashes, sounds and bumps of a particular kind.” (Hanson 1958: 20-24)

• Challenging Lockean empiricism ‘... light arising from the nature of things themselves’.

• The paradox of empiricism (Chisholm 1966: 56): the experience-knowledge dialectic

• “Experience, in one or another of its various senses, is said to be the source of our knowledge; every valid claim to knowledge, it is supposed, will satisfy certain empirical criteria; and these criteria, it is then concluded, may be used to determine the extent of our knowledge. Empiricism thus begins paradoxically with a general premise.” [emphasis in original]
ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION

• **Unmotivated looking**: ‘If we pick any data, without bringing any problems to it, we will find something’. (Sacks 1984: 27)

• **Motivated looking** (Sarangi and Candlin 2001): directing the analytic attention into some channels rather than others; motivated looking [based on experience] is unavoidable when undertaking sequential data analysis or when freezing the data for closer analysis.

• **Motivated looking is not only unavoidable, but is desirable in many research settings.**

ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION

• Both motivated and unmotivated looking can border on ‘over-interpretation’.

• “Any definition of man in terms of specialised scientific nomenclatures would necessarily be ‘over-socialised’, or ‘over-biologised’, or ‘over-psychologised’, or ‘over-physicised’, or ‘overpoeticised’, and so on, depending upon which specialised terministic screen was being stretched to cover not just its own special field but a more comprehensive area.” (Burke 1966: 52)

ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION

• At the level of interpretation, Goffman (1981: 32) refers to *the sins of noncontextuality*, to the assumption that bits of conversation can be analysed in their own right in some independence of what was occurring at the time and place”.

• Following from the above, we can also talk about *the sins of contextuality* – what we take as the circumference of context vis-à-vis our interpretive stance.
Ethics of Interpretation

• "Interpretation of professional behaviour, and especially any attempt to evaluate professional practice, can only sensibly proceed with some input from the professionals. This is not to say that a professional's account of their practice must be taken at face value ... but an attempt to make sense of practice without some input from professionals is unlikely to be productive.”
  (Clarke 2005: 189)

Ethics of Interpretation

• "A 'fly on the wall' [= outside researcher] who did not know we were doing psychotherapy would not necessarily suspect that that was what we were doing: he would see and hear only an ordinary conversation. What defines the conversation as psychotherapy is simply our goal in conducting the conversation.”
  (O’Hanlon and Wilk 1987: 177)

Ethics of Interpretation

• More generally...
  • "All natives take their native knowledge for granted, take it to be nothing other than the nature of the world (Geertz 1973). But how could the conversation analyst recognise an utterance as a pre-invitation, for example, without trading on covert native knowledge of dating practices and the special significance for them of Saturday night?” (Moerman 1988: 4)
  • Thick participation (Sarangi 2007) thus becomes a precondition for thick description (Geertz 1973).
• “Fallacy of abstractionism” – framed as a paradox (type-token)

• “Any scientific understanding of human action, at whatever level of ordering or generality, must begin with and be built upon an understanding of the everyday life of the members performing those actions. (To fail to see this and to act in accord with it is to commit what we might call the fallacy of abstractionism, that is, the fallacy of believing that you can know in a more abstract form what you do not know in the particular form.)” (Douglas 1971: 11)

• The “paradox of microanalysis” (Labov and Fanshel 1977): any general understanding of events, speech-language therapy included, may be distorted when specific aspects of those events become the primary focus of investigation.

• “A fine-grained analysis is only appropriate for answering some sorts of questions, and a full understanding will not necessarily emerge from describing and analyzing behaviour at the most detailed level. While a microscope is an invaluable tool in some circumstances it would be useless, say, for reading a novel.”

(Martin and Bateson 1993: 9)
ANALYST’S PARADOX

• **Analyst’s paradox**: the activity of obtaining members’ insights to inform analytic practice, including collaborative interpretation (Sarangi 2002, 2007).

• **Analyst’s paradox as a continuum**: it is at its most extreme when interpreting different professional and organisational practices, that is the backstage activities, e.g., case records, peer-centred talk/text as in case presentations, case conferences, source texts, guidance notes etc.

• **The paradox within Analyst’s paradox**: members’ inaccessibility/inarticulation of local/native knowledge.

CATEGORISATION AS INTERPRETATION

Categorisation labels on a cline

Evaluative .................................................. Descriptive

• When co-researchers across professional boundaries contest the perceived histories of certain category labels (Sarangi et al. 2003)

An example from genetic counselling

• Counsellor-initiated ‘therapeutic frames’ (= *reflective talk*)

• Client-initiated ‘normalisation of experience and expectation’ (= *psychosocial adjustment*)

ENGAGING QUALITATIVELY WITH DATA

[Sarangi 2017]
ENGAGING WITH QUALITATIVE DATA

• The tool box metaphor and the lens/gaze metaphor

Maslow’s ‘law of the hammer’: “It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail” (Abraham Maslow 1966: 15)

ENGAGING WITH QUALITATIVE DATA

• Maslow’s ‘law of the hammer’ (based on Kaplan’s [1964] ‘The law of the instrument’) amounts to narrow-minded instrumentalism, or over-reliance on a familiar tool, also characteristic of scientific inquiry – in qualitative inquiry, it means making analytic tools focal interests, characteristic of many methodological/analytical traditions.

• The constructs and categories that underpin qualitative analytic interpretation can reveal forms and functions of micro-phenomena, but at the same time they can blind one to alternative modes of description/categorisation.

ENGAGING WITH QUALITATIVE DATA

• With reference to the world of painting and art criticism, John Berger (2008: 1) writes:

  “We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach – though not necessarily within arm’s reach.”

• For, Kenneth Burke (1966), it is ‘terministic screen’ or ‘trained incapacities’: ‘every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing’ (Burke 1965: 49).
ENGAGING WITH QUALITATIVE DATA

• "Interpretation is therefore indeterminate, especially in relation to intentionality underpinning participants’ communicative behaviour. Such indeterminate accounts may be seen as unsatisfactory, but any ‘definitive versions’ are likely to be equally unsatisfactory 'because they imply unjustifiably that the analyst can reconcile his version of events with all the multiple and divergent versions generated by the actors themselves" (Gilbert and Mulkay 1984: 2).

DESCRIPTIVE DISCRETION

"The prevalence of descriptive discretion is not in itself epistemologically alarming, though it does weaken the prospects of any very crisply incremental development of the social sciences. In itself it comes no closer to imperilling the reality of human performance than variations in the taste of landscape artists come to altering the physical properties of mountains. To make it epistemologically alarming and not merely methodologically troublesome, it would be necessary for it to extend to the assertion and negation of the same description (identically interpreted) of the same phenomena by two different competent, sincere and attentive observers. (Dunn 1978: 155-156)

DISCUSSION POINTS

• What are the start and end points of our interpretive endeavours?
• How/when do we know our interpretive repertoire is exhausted?
• How do we go about defending our interpretation against possible alternative interpretations?
• In other words, where do we look for evidence (in data, in theory) to support our analytic claims?
• How do we frame our language of interpretation and claims-making?


SELECTED REFERENCES


